Luna, Who Dreamed of Being Snow White

By JUDY STONE

SAN FRANCISCO.

"As a man thinketh in his heart so is he," say the Hebrew sages quoted in "The Tibetan Book of the Dead," now high on the reading list of Donyale Luna. There is another quotation from Buddha: "The phenomena of life may be likened unto a dream, a phantasm, a bubble, a shadow, the glistening of dew, or lightning flash; and thus they ought to be contemplated."

Their words may help in contemplating the phenomenon of an astonishingly long and skinny black girl from Detroit who dreamed of being Snow White, conceived of herself as somehow related to the pale glow of moonlight, blossomed overnight as a model on the cover of Harper's Bazaar and will soon be seen as God's mistress in Otto Preminger's movie "Skidoo."

"It's a very funny story," said Preminger telling how he met Luna, his latest "discovery," at a party in New York for Twiggy. A stunning Negro model whose face had the hauteur and feline grace of Nefertiti approached and invited him to a showing of a film by Andy Warhol. Preminger suggested they come to his office instead. Luna and Warhol arrived with a half-hour screen test for a Mod "Snow White." It was Luna's script, her idea of "big camp" to play a towering Snow White with 13 hippies as dwarfs.

"She showed great talent," said Preminger. "Warhol just sat there with his black glasses, never saying a word. I offered drinks. He said, 'I don't drink.' I asked if there was anything else I could get for him. He said he would like some amphetamine. I didn't have amphetamine but I did have some diet pills. He emptied the pill box, ate them all and still didn't say anything. The next morning Luna called and asked if I would have lunch. 'What do you want to discuss?' I asked. 'Business,' she said. 'I thought you might want to finance a Warhol film.' I said I didn't finance films; I directed them. She said, 'Oh, you *direct* too.'"

Preminger laughed heartily. That seemed to be the end of the matter until work began on "Skidoo," Preminger's first comedy since "The Moon Is Blue." As he summed it up, the story involves the "confrontation of hippies with the establishment, but the establishment are gangsters who consider themselves very respectable and are proud of our society." Jackie Gleason plays an ex-gangster who was permitted to retire 17 years earlier and live with his wife, Carol Channing, in the sumptuously stuffy suburbs south of San Francisco, Groucho Marx will play God, the name used by the gang leader who calls Gleason back into service, and Faye Dunaway had been cast as God's mistress until she decided to buy out of her contract with Preminger.

As a replacement, the director thought of Luna for the part of the oversexed mistress who continually cheats on God. To Preminger's horror, when Luna arrived from Rome to take up his offer of a three-year contract, she was wearing a blonde wig and blue contact lenses. "And she brought a young man who turned out to be a German. He had more hair than anybody I'd ever seen. An actor. Her fiancé."

Preminger looked merry throughout this recital between film takes at a wildly rococo, ivy-covered, turreted mansion. It was not significant that he had hired a Negro for the role. "Any attractive woman could play it," he said. "I just thought of Luna, a hunch. The color doesn't mean anything. Call a character God and everything becomes a little unreal. His mistress happens to be a pretty Negro model —just like Luna has a German fiancé."

Preminger deepened the dismal feeling I already had about meeting Luna, whom other reporters had found secretive, mysterious, contradictory, evasive, mercurial and insistent upon her multiracial lineage — exotic, chameleon strands of Mexican, American Indian, Chinese, Irish and last, but least escapable, Negro. What must it be like for a girl to grow up and up — 5 feet 10½ inches, 5 feet 11 inches, and finally 6 feet 2 inches — not white, not black, in Detroit? One story had her real name as Peggy Freeman and said she never mentioned a father; in Detroit, a reporter wrote that she was born Peggy Luna and her father was a Ford Motor company foreman. In fact, her birth certificate lists Nathaniel and Peggy Freeman as her parents and Ford has no employment record for such a man.

One fact *was* clear: Photographer David McCabe had changed her life when he spotted her in Detroit. She was leaving a rehearsal of a local TV show in which she was to perform. He asked her if she were a model and suggested she go to New York. Instant success at age 18. The editors of Harper's Bazaar couldn't believe their eyes when she walked in, immediately had her sketched for the January, 1965, cover and later rhapsodized that Luna had "the tall strength and pride of movement of a Masai warrior."

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What very few people knew was how desperately she must have needed those very qualities; the same month she made Harper's cover, Nathaniel Freeman met a violent and tragic death. He had been a "brutal" man, one of Luna's relatives told me, and that unhappy, scrawny little girl had withdrawn early into a private world. "She was a very weird child, even from birth, living in a wonderland, a dream. We'd say, 'Peggy, these things aren't true.' Maybe that's why she was so good in drama class." Or maybe "acting was in her blood," an inheritance from a beloved Irish grandmother who had been an actress before her marriage to a Negro decorator.

Luna had a brief unhappy marriage in New York ("a gigolo, she's found quite a few of them, they hitch right on to her"). When her yearlong contract with photographer Richard Avedon expired, she fled from New York where she had found "they said beautiful things on one side and turned around and stabbed you in the back." Soon she was sending out invitations for her marriage to Maximilian Schell — but it never took place. A Danish photographer was her "fiancé" in London and Paris while she quickly became the hottest model in Europe. A London magazine burbled: "The beautiful thing about Donyale is that she is a Negress . . . the completely New Image of the Negro woman. Fashion finds itself in an instrumental position for changing history, however slightly, for it is about to bring out into the open the veneration, the adoration, the idolization of the Negro . . ."

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So here is Luna, about to break into the movies at this momentous time in her life. She swoops in late, an incredible sight in a black velvet, purple silk-lined cutaway jacket, bell-bottomed trousers, a vivid yellow turtleneck sweater, enormous pink jade, amber, glass and silver rings on eight fingers, a round gold "caste" mark on her forehead. Her fiancé, Georg Willing, formerly with the Living Theater in Berlin, shows up later in an identical black velvet suit with a white open shirt, revealing a necklace of silver medallions inset with ivory scarabs, three jeweled rings on his left hand, a brass Moroccan bracelet on the right. His brown hair is worn shoulder-length and bangs fall over his forehead. Luna's black hair is brushed tightly off her face and neatly tied in back. Her eyes are adroitly slanted with make-up, but the bright blue contact lenses mask her reactions as effectively as Georg's sunglasses mask his. When she takes the lenses out, her eyes are a warm—but wary—brown. His turn out to be blue, intelligent, forthright, somewhat self-questioning, masculine.

Luna's voice is low and vaguely foreign, some never-never-land lilt picked up in London, Paris and Rome. Rome, so full of "love," compared to the "chaos" here. She is happy, rather elegant, so long as the talk is safely impersonal.

"I'm a very sentimental type," she says. The rings are from people who gave her happiness, or were made by ancient gurus who could read the future. The gold caste mark is "for fun, pure fun. I think life should be gay, amusing, not ordinary. When I'm being funny, I say it's my third eye. It's with the Buddhist religion. Not all monks acquire a third eye. When a human being reaches that state — they can actually fly. It's called levitation." She is vague about whether it's Buddhism or Yoga that appeals to her. No matter, "it gives me peace of mind."

Gently encouraged by Georg, she finally admits that she has taken LSD, but won't specify how often. "I think it's great," she adds defiantly. "I learned that I like to live, I like to make love, I really do love somebody, I love flowers, I like the sky, I like bright colors, I like animals. It also showed me unhappy things — that I was stubborn, stupid, selfish, unreasonable, mean, that I hurt other people . . ."

"No, you don't," Georg interrupted softly.

"No, I don't hurt them, but I *could* make them feel better. It showed me that I lived in a dream world and I didn't know how to get out and I didn't know why. I'm in that dream world very rarely now."

Her sudden fame was "very, very tough," but she went into it willingly. "For the first time, people said, 'Oh, wow, she's beautiful' instead of 'Oh, wow, she's a freak.'" Now she is writing her "Cinderella" story "from the age of 17, when I came out into the world, until 21" for a book "Luna by Luna." She insists that Luna is the name of her "real, real father." And she will be billed simply as Luna in "Skidoo."

At 22, Luna says she finally knows what she wants: "I want to fly together with the man I love. I can have that without money. Money really isn't it." If destiny makes her a star, "that's groovy; if it doesn't, it won't change anything." She's not worried about working with Preminger because "I think he's strong, direct and honest and I dig that honesty. He's a fantastic moviemaker. He really blew my mind, made a mark in my head with 'Exodus.' I flipped when I heard I was playing God's mistress. I thought that was the grooviest role in the world. In everything else, they only wanted *me*, to be myself, a model. For the first time, I can be someone I've always wanted to play, a sexy, seductive type of gangster girl. Now it's even better. *God's* girl."

How does her mother react to that? The glow left her face and her voice was wooden. "She's glad, very glad," Luna said, "but she really wants me to come home." Luna has no intention of having her mother meet Georg or of discussing plans for their marriage. "You can say we *are* married. I don't believe in these things. If people love each other, they are together. You don't need a priest to confirm that. When we want children, we'll go through that black-and-white process. I'm not going to send my children to school. Schools today are idiotic. They tell lies and make them the truth. Schools just bring about a lot of bad complexes. I have them too. Hangups, hangups. I hope I'll be good enough and wise enough to teach my children myself. I won't do what my mother did to me. Parents deprive a child of the chance to really live a life. A son calls his father and says he's happy because he's living with the girl he loves and the father calls him a 'gigolo.' The child is put down for something he finds happiness in. Like my mother wanted me to be a nurse."

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Did she hope her new job would open up more movie roles for Negro women?

Icily she replied, "I don't think about that."

"She's white," said Georg, "didn't you know?"

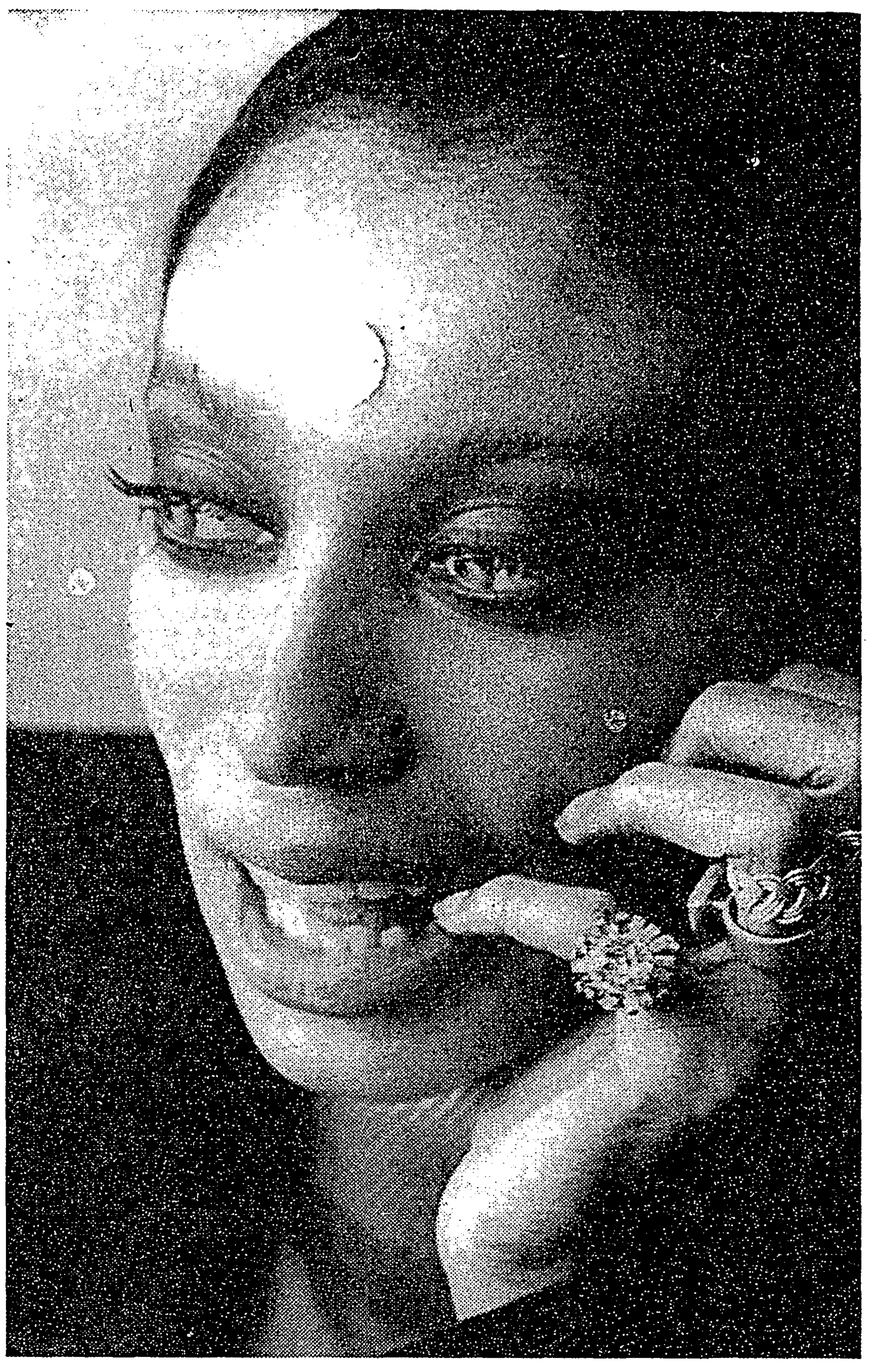
But then Luna reconsidered for a moment. "If it brings about more jobs for Mexicans, Chinese, Indians, Negroes, groovy. It could be good, it could be bad. I couldn't care less."

Pressed, she fumbled for an explanation of her racial background — "My mother is Mexican," she said.

"Luna," I said, "it's as impossible to be a quarter-Negro in America today as it was to be a quarter-Jew in Nazi Germany."

"That's America's problem," she retorted. "I would feel for any person who got shot down by a machine gun. I would feel the same for a Mexican or a Chinese. I'm not an American. Yeah, I'm an American *on black and white*, but I'm me, *I'm me*. When I got out of school, I started seeing and that's when I said, 'Do away with the churches, the police, the government, because it's all bunk.' It does no good at all. It only creates things like Vietnam, Hiroshima, race riots and frustration, confusion and destruction. What I know about America and what I see is a great deal. A lot of things I wish I had never seen because they are ugly and disgusting. They exist all over the world, not only in America, but they're more out in the open here. I could talk for 20 years about the things I've seen in America."

Then she carefully slipped the blue contact lenses over brown eyes that had seen more than they cared to see and sauntered out to pose for photographers, just like any other model in the U.S.A.



Michael Alexander

Luna, 6-foot-2-inch model, will act Groucho Marx's mistress in "Skidoo"
Will her job open up movie roles for Negro women? "I couldn't care less."

ALSO OPENING

THE DEVIL'S BRIGADE—World War II film with William Holden, Wednesday at the Astor, 86th St. East and 34th St. East.

WEEKEND, ITALIAN STYLE—Comedy with Sandra Milo, Wednesday at local houses.

WHAT'S SO BAD ABOUT FEELING GOOD?—Comedy about hippies with George Peppard and Mary Tyler Moore, Friday at the Trans-Lux East.

"PRUDENCE AND THE PILL"—Judy Geeson experiences the joy of motherhood in a comedy of errors involving aspirin and other pills. Deborah Kerr and David Niven help confuse things. It opens Thursday at the Victoria and Murray Hill Theaters.

"NO MORE EXCUSES"—It may look like a sequel to "Planet of the Apes," but it's not. It's Paula Morris, a girl with a few hang-ups, being interviewed by a groovy chimp in the offbeat film due Wednesday at the Bleecker Street. It was directed by Robert Downey, of "Chafed Elbows" fame.

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